



The Battle of Names and the Self in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract— Names and identity are inextricably linked and have a profound impact on an individual. Chitra Banerjee has depicted this link in her novel, *Mistress of Spices*, through the focal character Tilo. Tilo has struggled with identity since birth. Throughout each phase of her life, she's been given a new name. This research paper aims to explore the various names, their significance, and identities associated with Tilo. Each of her names reflects a new persona of hers. This paper also analyses Tilo's cognitive changes during the transformations. Her journey is perceived as a battle that she fights for her name and identity. Hence, the battle between her physical and emotional worlds, and her journey towards finding her true self, is also addressed.



Keywords— ambivalence, double consciousness, identity, naming, self-discovery

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a well-known Indian-American author, is known for her enchanting novels. Her works touch on themes like identity, magic, culture, and womanhood. Originally from Kolkata, India, she moved to the United States for her further studies. She later found success as a writer. She is one of the noted literary personalities of Indian Diasporic writers. Her works convey a blend of both Eastern and Western influences that shape her literary identity. Among her notable works is *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), an adored novel recognised and loved for its magical storytelling and vivid depiction of Indian life in diaspora. The novel unfolds in a magical spice shop settled in Oakland, California. From there, we follow the journey of Tilo. She is the focal character of the novel and a mystical woman. She can influence and heal people through the magical spices. Hence, she is known as the Mistress of Spices.

Through the adventures of Tilo and the layered plot of the novel, Divakaruni explores themes of identity, tradition, and the challenges faced by immigrants while living in diaspora. The recurring motif throughout the novel is Identity. Throughout the novel, we see Tilo battling and struggling for her name and identity. This pursuit of a sense of self aligns with the psychological studies of identity. Erik

Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968) says that when people cannot accept the roles given to them, they may take on a “negative identity.” This leads to confusion about the self. Tilo in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* can be seen in this light. Every name she carries shows both hope and pain. As Nayan Tara, she is seen as a miracle child. As Bhagyavati, she is tied to fate. As Tilottama, she is valued for her beauty but also trapped by it. As Tilo, she is bound to the spices and strict rules. These names are given to her by others. They never let her feel whole. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) explains how people wear masks created by society. These masks hide the true self. Such masks are also worn by Tilo. Each name becomes a mask that shapes her and, at the same time, distances her from her own wishes. She wants to be free and get loved, but feels restrained by obligation and custom. Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) explains that identity is not fixed. It is continually changing. It gets constantly molded by the time and situation. This helps us see Tilo's story not only as confusion but also as growth. Her names are not only masks but also stages in her becoming. Through Erikson, we see her struggle. Through Fanon, we see her alienation. Through Hall, we see her shifting identity, still alive and still being made. Placed side by side, it is revealed that Tilo's identity is a transformative one. It is not stable. Identity is

both “a matter of becoming” and “of being” (Hall 1990, 225). In the novel, Tilo embodies Stuart Hall’s notion of dynamic identity. According to Hall, identity is seen as both a process of becoming and a state of being. This is also visible in the case of Tilo, through her various names and identities. Each name given to her reflects a distinct facet of her tangled identity. She undergoes several personal transformations. “Tilo, the Mistress of Spices, has many disguises and names that reveal her multiple identities.” (Abirami S. and Nirmala, 2016: 259)

Just as Hall suggests, Tilo’s consciousness mirrors this complication by revealing desires that are conflicting. Tilo’s character emerges as an individual who is connected very closely with questions of identity, consciousness, and ambivalence. Being the Mistress of Spices and possessing all the magical abilities, she faces battles within herself. There are mixed feelings and emotions inside her mind. She has her duties as the Mistress of Spices, and at the same time, the heart of a common human being living in diaspora. She wants to fulfil her responsibilities, but at the same time wants to be in her true self. While she adores being the guardian of the ancient, traditional and cultural heritage, she harbors uncertainty about her identity. Divakaruni artfully uses the metaphor of life and identity while symbolically comparing it to the world of women. The progressive, ever-changing nature of spices also mirrors the constant evolution and transformation within her life. It symbolizes the creation of something new and fresh with every use, just like spices. This can be analysed aptly through the work of Gupta and Sharma-

“On one hand, spices provide her with a means to heal herself and others, facilitating emotional and physical recovery. Each spice holds the potential for empowerment, allowing her to foster community bonds and preserve cultural identity amidst the struggles of exile. However, this very connection to spices also becomes a reminder of Tilo’s inability to fully embrace her new identity.” (Gupta Shalu and Sharma Devendra Kumar, 2025: e118)

The enduring quest for self-discovery in Tilo’s character serves as a keystone of human existence across the ages. Her identity evolves through phases of struggles, crisis and uncertainty. This reflects the universal quest for self-understanding. She feels confused about who she is because her names and personalities keep changing. Each name she gets makes her act differently, and she doesn’t know which one is really her. Whether she is Nayan Tara, Bhagyavati, Tilottama, or Maya, she feels like she is playing a different role. This makes her feel ambivalent about herself. Moreover, the powers she possesses make things even more confusing. Tilo’s journey is about trying to figure out who she truly is among all these different versions of herself. “Who was I? I could not say. Already my name had faded in the rising island sun, like a star from a night that has passed away.” (Divakaruni 1997, 33) Tilo’s character is like

a puzzle when it comes to understanding who she really is and what she wants. This mirrors Abrams and Hogg’s idea- “Identity is people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Abrams and Hogg 1988, 2). During an identity crisis, individuals may resort to creating comforting illusions, rationalizing their shortcomings, reinventing themselves, or even facing existential extinction. The concept of identity is closely interconnected with the notion of the self. Tilo is caught between two worlds: one where she has special powers as the Mistress of Spices, and the other where she just wants to find love and happiness like anyone else. When Tilo meets, observes and listens to other people, it is more she learns about herself. In a crisis of identity, she looks for self-discovery. She learns about her strengths and what really matters to her. The identity of Tilo is a tangled and complicated one. This can be seen through the numerous names she possessed throughout her journey. Tilo’s confused identities, firstly as Nayan Tara and then Bhagyavati, Tilo, and Maya convey the identity crisis and sense of self-discovery at the same time. As Densingh observes in his paper “New Names, New Identities of Tilo in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*” -

“In the novel, Tilo has many disguises and she keeps on changing her names throughout the novel, making clear the complex problem of identity crisis that the Indian try to cope with in a foreign land. She has been changing her name from Nayan Tara as a good daughter then to Bhagyavati during her stay with the pirates then to Tilo and finally Maya when she finds her love. Tilo manages to define herself at the very end of the novel as “Maya”, a Hindu term that defines the everyday world of desire, pain and joy. “Maya” represents the illusionary power of the world.” (Densingh, 2016: 178)

In the novel, Tilo adopts different disguises and names. This reflects the major challenge faced by Indians living in a foreign land. This might lead to confronting their sense of self. Tilo’s transformations illustrate the battle between her true identity and the roles she must adopt to support others. At the outset of the novel, when we are introduced to Tilo, we get a glimpse of the magical world she inhabits. Divakaruni portrays Tilo as a mysterious and puzzling figure. Someone who is inseparably connected to the essence of spices and gifted with remarkable abilities. We also come to know that her journey through life is marked by difficult times and the discovery of multiple identities. Through her experiences, we witness her struggles, growth, and the complexities of her existence. Additionally, we come to understand how Tilo faces ambivalence and straddles between double consciousness. She tries to balance her mystical duties as Mistress of Spices with personal desires with mindfulness. The several names of Tilo represent different aspects of her character and powers. Tilo was born in a village and she was named Nayan Tara. Then the pirates carry her away and then she is called

'Bhagyavati'. When she decides to reach the island, the snakes name her 'Sarpakanya'. To become Mistress of Spices, she changed her name to Tilo, meaning 'a life giver and a restorer of health and hope'. She has to change her identities many times in order to arrive at a final definition of her selfhood. This can be analysed through the following: "Fire is the beginning of Noyantara's new phase of life. She served as a pirate queen for a few years, and her name was Bhagyavathi. She reviews her life as a pirate queen and wants to know her dream and give another calling thinking about the sea. As a result, the underwater snake came up with a typhoon in the water she was rescued and saved. Water represents the mystery of creation as a symbol of life, cleaning and rebirth. Whereas the life of Noyantara cleanses, she revealed First Mother and her novice when she opened her eyes. The character First Mother means as savior and guru, according to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. First Mother who rescued Noyantara from water and called her Tilottama, meaning life-giving, health-restoring, and hope." (Rajeswari R., Suganya A. 2019, 30). This research paper analyses in depth the battle and significance of these names in Tilo's life, and how they shape her identity.

II. NAYAN TARA

Tilo's identity is a dynamic one. It can be analysed through the variety of names she was assigned during each new phase of her life. Every name holds a significant meaning that influences her identity. At the initial phase of her life, i.e., on her birth, she was named by her parents- "Nayan Tara, Star of the Eye" (Divakaruni 1997, 7). Being born as the third daughter to a family with financial struggles, she was seen as a burden. This led to an array of battles for her. She was neglected by her parents and sought love and acceptance. She wanted to do something meaningful in her life so that she could get acceptance. With the ability to see the future, she was loved by the villagers, but still lacked love from her family. Her name, Nayan Tara, holds great significance. It symbolises her vision and power to see and tell the future of people. It conveys her childhood journey. This name also echoes Tilo's celestial and otherworldly abilities. Nayan Tara, the name suggests the intuitions and insights that Tilo possessed. Though the significance of this name goes beyond its denotative meaning. The personal wishes, aspirations, and desires of Tilo are also symbolised through this name. It condenses to the fulfilment, happiness, and satisfaction Tilo wants in her life. A direction that she wants in her life is to chase love and joy. However, the irony is that despite being called 'Star of the Eye', she is often neglected by her family and community. The name 'Nayan Tara' for Tilo isn't just a name. It holds the foundations of Tilo's overall identity throughout her journey.

It is believed that names are often linked with destiny. Hence is the case with Tilo's journey with multiple names and identities. As she proceeds in life with her first name,

Nayan Tara, she undergoes the cognitive transformations too. Being Nayan Tara, she gains confidence. She feels optimistic and begins to care for herself. She also understands how she has built an identity for herself with her ability to tell the future. An identity with which she is known to others, and how society perceives her. With this name, Tilo built an identity for herself, but was still not fully aware of herself. This was just the initial phase, which later led to a big battle of identity and names.

III. BHAGYAVATI

In the second important phase of life, Tilo is known by the name 'Bhagyavati'. It holds a profound importance in shaping her identity. Through this name, she comes to understand her place in the world. The talents she possessed were not considered greatly by the family and villagers. Eventually, one day, pirates raided her village. They kidnapped her and renamed her 'Bhagyavati'. They believed that she could bring them luck by telling them the future and the path to hidden treasures. Tilo narrates this part of her life as an ironic one. "The pirate chief's voice lifted above dying moans, giving me in awful irony my new name. Bhagyavati, Bringer of Luck, for so I was to be for them." (Divakaruni 1997, 19) Tilo felt far removed from her destiny while she resided on the ship with pirates. She experiences an identity crisis. This can be analysed through the following lines- "Nights I walked the decks alone and sleepless, I Bhagyavati, Sorceress, Pirate queen, bringer of luck and death..." (Divakaruni 1997, 20)

The relevance of the name Bhagyavati is closely connected to Tilo's journey of self-discovery. Through this phase, she tries to understand her destiny. This name symbolises a fortunate person or one with good fortune. The pirates have faith in Tilo's magical powers. They think that her presence will lead them to their destined fortunes and treasures. Hence, they associate her name with their ambitions for treasure. However, Tilo herself feels disconnected from this perception of her role. She experiences an identity crisis as well as disconnection from her purpose in life. The name Bhagyavati reveals the importance of destiny and fate in Tilo's life. During this phase, Tilo battles with two ideas in her mind. Whether her life and identity were already decided or if she could make destiny on her own. But when it comes to the significance of the name, it comes with an irony here, too. Being in the identity of Bhagyavati, Tilo is perceived to tell the future of people, but in her own case, she is unable to do so. She is baffled. She is seen as someone who brings luck to others, but on the other hand, she wants to regulate her future. Her transformation from Nayan Tara to Bhagyavati has a huge impact on her mental processes. While she felt confident and embraced her evolving identity as Nayan Tara, she lost it all as Bhagyavati. With the identity of Bhagyavati (after abduction), she is seen as baffled, underconfident, and

Pessimistic in thoughts. She fights a battle with her own thoughts and the way pirates perceive her for their benefit. Tilo's identity as Bhagyavati lasted for a short time, but had a lasting impact on her mind.

IV. TILOTTAMA

The successful escape from the pirates led Bhagyavati to arrive at a magical island. A place where she was renamed for the third time as Tilo. "My name which is Tilo, short for Tilottama, for I am named after the sun-burnished sesame seed, spice of nourishment." (Divakaruni 1997, 5) This name signifies the magical powers Tilo possesses over the spices. Becoming the Mistress of Spices, after coming out of Shampati's fire, Tilottama represents a profound transformation. "And now she writes my new name on my forehead. My Mistress name finally and forever, after so many changes in who I am. My true name that I am never to tell to any but the sisterhood." (Divakaruni 1997, 43)

'Tilottama', the name carries multiple layers of meaning. It serves as a replication of Tilo's lively character and aims. Following Hindu mythology, Tilottama was the most elegant of the dancers in Lord Indra's court. Indra is observed as the King of the gods. Tilottama is renowned for her beauty and grace. This name associates Tilo with elegance, beauty, and divine presence. It is aligned with the self-discovery of Tilo. When she chooses this name for herself, it shows that she is ready to build her own identity now. With this new identity, she hopes for healing and happiness. Tilo, the name mirrors the optimistic attitude of Tilo to discover her true self and inner beauty. Tilo embraces her mystical powers and is excited to guide and heal people. When she covers herself in this new identity, she is transformed into an old woman (physically). She is now the Mistress of Spices in Oakland, California. Tilo lives a disguised life over there, helping and supporting people in survival in the distant land. She also uses her ability to tell the fortune of people, along with being the Mistress of Spices. She chooses herself a relevant name, Tilottama (Tilo). But she is also hinted at by the First Mother about the complications of her new and evolving identity. Firstly, Tilo enjoys her new identity, being the Mistress of Spices, observing, listening and healing people. But soon she realises the boundaries she has agreed on. It can be clearly noticed through the words of Rajeswari R., and Suganya A.- "Tilo finds herself embroiled in the Spice Mistress ' rules and regulations." (32) She understands that her personal desires should also be prioritized. With this identity, she is restricted to love, or she'll have to lose her powers forever. She regrets this identity of hers once she starts loving Raven. She again thinks of changing her identity. She undergoes the cognitive changes, earlier happy, empathetic, energetic, hopeful and confident. Later, turning into questionable life choices. She also faces physical and mental battles throughout her journey.

V. MAYA

"Tilo has been given the name Maya, which is a name with roots in both India and the United States. After going by several different names throughout the course of the novel, including Nayan Tara, Bhagyavati, Tilo, and Tilottoama, the protagonist finally settles on Maya as her new name at the end of the book." (Kumar T., Jayshankar A.G. 2022, c514)

Approaching the end of the novel's plot, an earthquake shakes the foundations of Tilo's world. It catalyzes change, encouraging Tilo to reassess her identity. Tilo experiences the identity transformation for the last time. This time, she chooses herself as 'Maya', referring to illusions. This transformation from Tilo to Maya symbolises her desire to start afresh. "Maya is a name that is widely used in both of the countries that she is interested in living in." (Kumar T., Jayshankar A.G. 2022, c514). Through this new identity, she sheds the previous one and the boundaries associated with it. She leaves behind the duties and powers. By choosing herself as Maya, she tries to regain the identity she had been longing for. Maya was an identity to define herself. The deceptions of Tilo's experiences till now in her life, especially with identity and names, are left behind with this new identity. Thus, the name Maya stands for the renewal and personal growth of Tilo. With this identity comes a new version of Tilo. Now she is a person who is not restricted by any norms.

Being covered in the identity of Maya, her way of perceiving herself also changes. With this name and identity, she envisions a future with Raven. As Maya, she evolves into a woman who has accepted her past and found fulfilment in her present. The relevance of this new name is all about the new change and growth in Tilo's life. Unlike Tilo, Maya has a resilient, new, optimistic, and more confident attitude. This helps her to be Maya.

In the novel, Tilo's names teach us a lot about how identity and names are linked. Each name she has represents a different part of her story and how she sees herself. They show us how names can affect how people see us and how we see ourselves. Tilo's journey with her names shows that who we are isn't set in stone; it's something we can change and figure out as we go along. The four different names of Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* play a profound role in shaping her identity and journey of self-discovery. Tilo faces an identity crisis throughout her life. "They do not know this, my customers, nor that earlier I had other names. Sometimes it fills me with a heaviness, lack of black ice, when I think that across the entire length of this land not one person knows who I am." (Divakaruni 1997, 5)

VI. COGNITIVE SHIFTS IN TILO'S MIND BETWEEN DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND AMBIVALENCE

Tilo's identity in *The Mistress of Spices* can be seen through many theories that explain how a self is formed and changed. Freud in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) shows that the self is divided, and this can be felt in Tilo's mind, where duty, desire, and fear often fight with each other. Erik Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968) speaks about identity confusion, and Tilo goes through this whenever her name changes. Tilo never finds a tranquil state of mind. Every single name comes with new duties. Stuart Hall in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996) tells us that identity is never fixed but always in process. This is true for Tilo. She moves from Tilottama to Tilo, and then to a woman who wishes for love and freedom. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) speaks about ambivalence, and Tilo's life is full of it. She is uncertain between ritual and yearning, amid magic and humanoid life. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) shows how people feel divided when they try to live between two cultures. Tilo has the exact same feelings. Her thoughts are divided on one side, where she remains loyal and dutiful to the spices. On the other hand, when she desires the loveful life with Raven. Her names mark these shifts. Sometimes they give her strength. Sometimes they cause doubt. In her mind, a slow change takes place. She moves from obedience to questioning, from silence to voice. Her identity is never one thing, but many. It is broken, shifting, and rebuilt again. In this way, Tilo's journey feels close to many women and migrants who live between worlds and learn to shape themselves in the space of conflict. These theories of shifting identity come together in Du Bois's theory of double consciousness. Tilo's journey in *The Mistress of Spices* can be seen through the idea of double consciousness, first spoken of by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). One soul speaks in the voice of the self. The other repeats the voice of the world. This is what Tilo feels. Her names make this inner struggle sharper. As Tilottama, she is trained to obey and surrender. As Tilo, she serves the spices with care, yet her heart begins to stir with quiet desires. When Raven enters her life, another self-rises. That self-wishes to leave the shop and live as an ordinary woman. None of these selves can silence the others. They press against one another, leaving her torn. In her mind, two voices argue. One voice keeps reminding her about her vows and duties to the spices. The other tempts her with the warmth of love and the chance of another life. Her shop is both a shelter and a cage. Through this struggle, her self begins to change. She moves slowly from silence to voice, from blind obedience to questioning. Her identity does not stay fixed. It splits, it gets fractured, but still tries to adapt and adjust and finally reconstructs. Tilo, through her shifting identity, understands that the self is not just one thing, but it consists of many and is

transformative. This is one of the reasons why Tilo's life mirrors the lives of diverse women and migrants. To live between two worlds is to carry two minds. To stand between tradition and freedom is to feel divided within. It is painful, but it also creates strength. Tilo lives with this divide. From it, she slowly shapes a new self. She feels hurt, yet she is alive. She feels torn, yet she still holds herself together. Her divided self shapes not only her identity but also the shifts in her thinking and perception.

The battle of names and the self in Tilo's life affects her mind, and we notice cognitive changes in her character. Tilo experiences several changes in her mindset, from sacrificing to accepting and then questioning her identity. Firstly, detaching herself from the materialistic world, illusions, love, and joy, and then attaching herself to these. There is a shift in her thought process in each new phase. If we analyse it from the beginning to the end, she becomes resistant from obedient. Earlier, she used to remain silent, but towards the end, she raised her voice for herself. This shift in Tilo's thought process can be sensed all through her journey.

It is also analysed that Tilo battles with ambivalence and a sense of double consciousness, resulting from the manifold names and identity. Both concepts are related to the cognitive processes and emotions. Ambivalence is a feeling that is often explored in the characters of diaspora novels. It is kind of a mixed feeling, where the individual keeps hanging between the two cultures and emotions. People who experience this are split between the two. Tilo keeps oscillating between the Indian and American cultures and exhibits mixed feelings. She is rooted in the Indian culture and tradition, while she adores the American one. She wants to adopt the free American lifestyle, and doesn't want to leave her Indian roots. Tilo tries to balance her Indian traditions with modern ways. As the Mistress of Spices, her struggle is real. She is pulled in two directions. She wants to get both things done; do her duties and live a life with Raven, free of boundaries. Her mindset and identity are always unsure, which reflects the ambivalence.

Tilo, as a diaspora subject, fits in the idea of double consciousness given by W.E.B. Du Bois. It is "A twoness in one body; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (Bois 2007, 3). Characters in diaspora often face this feeling of living in two worlds. They have dual cultural identities. The case is the same with Tilo. Her contradictory identities make her question about her true self. She sees herself through the eyes of Indian traditions and also through the American expectations. She has a split awareness of herself. She is neither fully Indian nor an American. The cognitive growth of Tilo is shaped by this simultaneous belonging and non-belonging. This can be said that Tilo's identity is not a fixed one, but an identity in progress with inconsistency. "Identity is not a fixed point

but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself" (Hall 1989, 23).

VII. CONCLUSION

Through this paper, we can conclude that names and identity are closely linked in *The Mistress of Spices*. Tilo's life has been shaped by the many names she has carried. Each name has been given with purpose and meaning. With every new name, a new self has been created. Her identity has been seen as fluid and changing. A struggle between her inner and outer worlds has been observed. Ambivalence has been felt in her choices and actions. Cognitive changes have been experienced at each stage. The burden of expectation has been carried through her various names. At the same time, strength has been gained from them. The spices have been presented as guides and limits. Transformation has been shown as both painful and healing. Identity is seen as a progression, not a limit. Tilo's loss of one identity gives rise to the other. In Tilo's journey, we have seen both duality and endurance. Her journey also reflects the global quest for belonging. The conflict of the diaspora has been mirrored in her struggle. Acceptance of change has brought healing. Hence, it is comprehended that identity cannot be limited to one name. At last, Tilo's life has been viewed as a journey of struggle, hope, and self-realization.

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